

[Mountain Merchant-Farmer]

Alabama

Dan Smith

Merchant and Farmer

Mentone, Alabama.

Covington Hall

Editorial Department

Interview Life sketch

MOUNTAIN MERCHANT-FARMER

Dan Smith — “Dan'l” to his wife — lives with his wife and three children, one son and two daughters, on the highway about two miles east of Mentone. He runs a country store and farms for a living. He also peddles produce for himself and others in the surrounding markets. In addition the family does laundry work for wealthier residents. They are always busy, but when Dan has nothing else to do, Dan goes fishing, which is about his only recreation. He has been off the mountain and has visited New York and other cities. He knows something of the world, is interested in what is happening and comments intelligently on the news. He is quiet-mannered and never uses an oath. He is a good friend and neighbor. Many still owe him money on credits he allowed them in the hard years from 1930 to 1934, but he does not hound them to pay up. Now and then he will send a bill with a note explaining, “I've got to pay my taxes and licenses and if you can pay all this bill or something on it, I'll appreciate it,” or he calls to their attention the long overdue account and tells them the same thing. They pay if they can and, if they can't, he

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sighs and says: "Well, I know how hard times are. Pay me something as soon as you can." And the account remains on the books, Dan hoping that some day he will get his money.

Knowing that he had traveled quite a bit. I asked him why he came back to the mountain. "Some people," he said, "like city life, but I don't. I was raised here and I like the country and want to live in it. Besides I don't see where most of the people 2 living in cities are better off or more satisfied than we are."

He seldom talks of religion and then only when someone else introduces it. Recently the Church of God evangelists had been holding a protracted meeting and the congregation was preparing a big dinner for the final day. The rural carrier leaves our mail at Dan's store, the path to which passes near the church. Returning from the store, I asked Dan: "What's going on?"

"We are getting ready for a dinner tomorrow. Come and help us eat it," he invited.

I assured him that I would if I could. Then I asjed: "Are you a Holy Roller?"

"No, not yet," he replied;" but I'm considering it."

His answer surprised me, for in my talks with him he had not seemed to take much interest in religion, often, in fact laughing at some jest at the expense of the preachers by one of the ungodly.

His home and store are all under one roof. The house is entered through the store, which is stocked with country merchandise. On the left, built onto the main building, is a storehouse for coal oil and other commodities he does not wish to keep in the store. Back of the store is the sitting room, warmed by a coal-burning heater and well-furnished with comfortable chairs and a lounge. On cold days it is often filled with those who have come for their mail or for groceries and stayed to talk over things. They are not intruding, for Dan and Mrs. Smith often insist: "Come in an' sit awhile an' get warmed up before you

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start home.” To the right of this room is a large, well-lighted dining room, in which is a long dining table to which friends are often invited to a chair. They eat well, Mrs. Smith being, not only an expert canner of fruits and vegetables, and curer of meats, 3 but a fine cook as well. The kitchen is in the front end of but separated from the dining room. Off of it is a screened gallery when one goes to get a drink of cool well water or to wash up. The bedrooms are between the store and dining room part of the building. All have good furnishings and are ceiled and floored. The Smiths own an automobile, a mule, cows and chickens, and these, with the store and farm and washing and peddling, enable them to get by. So Dan rarely complains of the hard times. He is not of the complaining sort.

Asked me why a friend I camp with when on the mountain did not build himself a house. “I built mine myself and I’m no builder and he is. He could have built himself a good house. It don’t cost much if a man does the work himself. Why doesn’t he do it instead of him and his folks living in that old log cabin?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But you know him. When he gets a notion in his head only dynamite can get it out; and having the idea that he wouldn’t even fix up the old place but would wait until he got hold of enough money to build a real home, he prefers to freeze rather than add a room to or patch up the cabins.”

“Yes, that’s him,” he agreed; “but he’s crazy to live like that, good a builder as he is.”

Dan is slim and spare and so is his wife. Neither seems to be very strong. He was gassed “Over There” during the world war. Yet they stand up under work that would kill a mule, and Dan never seems to be in a rush. He takes it easy, to an inveterate smoker and may take a drink of beer when he feels like it. He subscribes to and reads farm journals and other papers, but there are not many books lying around the house. When he was urged to 4 renew his subscripton to a certain weekly, he said: “No; I like the paper but I haven’t time to read all those I take now.” He knows something of the issues stirring political, labor and farmer groups today, but, like many others, has about come to the conclusion that “the

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big men don't know what to do themselves. All they are doing is to carry us around the ringarosey." There are many Republicans in the county, but whether he is one or not, or a Democrat, I don't know. I gather from my talks with him, though, that he is what is styled a "Left-wing New Dealer." But Dan prefers fishing any time to politics, laughing, "It's a heap more fun to fish for trout than suckers."

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L.H.